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Abstract

In his novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), Caryl Phillips fictionalises the life story of the Caribbean-born black American minstrelsy entertainer Bert Williams who became America's most famous and best-paid performer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other stories interwoven into Phillips's imaginative retelling are those of Williams's wife Lottie; his black stage partner George Walker; and Walker's wife Ada. This polyphony of adopted voices – along with the inclusion of (fictional?) authentic material such as newspaper clippings, excerpts from interviews and original lyrics from some of Williams's and Walker's musical shows – allows Phillips to provide the reader with a sense of Bert Williams the person as well as with a sense of the times in which the novel is set.

Performative Bondage or the Limits of Performing Race in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*

In his novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), Caryl Phillips fictionalises the life story of the Caribbean-born black American minstrelsy entertainer Bert Williams who became America's most famous and best-paid performer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other stories interwoven into Phillips's imaginative retelling are those of Williams's wife Lottie; his black stage partner George Walker; and Walker's wife Ada. This polyphony of adopted voices — along with the inclusion of (fictional?) authentic material such as newspaper clippings, excerpts from interviews and original lyrics from some of Williams's and Walker's musical shows — allows Phillips to provide the reader with a sense of Bert Williams the person as well as with a sense of the times in which the novel is set.

In my article I trace the numerous implications and consequences of the 'anomaly of a black person performing in blackface' (Garber 281) on a personal as well as on a larger societal and cultural level. While painfully attempting to preserve his personal integrity and dignity in view of his adopted role, Phillips portrays Bert as the embodiment of Ralph Ellison's 'sacrificial figure' engaged in a self-humiliating and self-effacing act. More specifically, I attempt to read Bert Williams's performance of race through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of repeated and re-enacted identity. I begin my analysis with the question of whether her conceptualisation of the performativity of gender can be appropriated and redeployed in the context of race. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that '[t]here is no gender [read race] identity behind the expressions of gender [read race]; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results ... gender [read race] proves to be performative ... gender [read race] is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (1999 33). That is, I wish to argue that just like gender, race is performative and cannot be traced back to some kind of original core. This anti-essentialising view suggests that it is the subject's acts that produce the effect of an internal core or substance and that, in fact, this essence or identity is the fabrication of a public fantasy, a phantasmatic illusion that reduces — in this context — the black person to a 'negative sign' (Ellison 1572) of the 'shuffling dumb fool', the 'coon', the 'happy-go-lucky nigger'.

According to Butler, the subject that is caught up in this web of interpellating calls may not only experience this condition as an act of violation producing

estrangement and division, but the interpellation could also lead to what Gayatri Spivak calls an 'enabling violation' (qtd in Butler 1993 122). That is, the subject responds to these interpellations by articulating its opposition. In this way, the subject achieves a certain agency which is paradoxically derived from 'the impossibility of choice' (Butler 1993 124 [*italics in original*]). Hence, one could argue that in imitating race, or more precisely, an inferior racialised subject, Bert Williams's performance implicitly reveals the imitative structure of race itself. His performance dramatises the cultural mechanism of the fabricated fantasy and exposes the 'phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction' and thus reveals the 'temporal and contingent groundlessness' (Butler 1999 179) of a substantial ground of identity. However, tragically where this illusion of a fabricated fantasy may work for drag¹, it does not work for Bert, the black minstrelsy performer, a subject that is fixed within a limiting identity of clearly circumscribed historical and cultural confines. As Judith Butler has furthermore outlined on the subject of parody: 'Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony ... indeed, parodic laughter depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered' (1999 176–77).

While Bert Williams's and George Walker's deliberate decision to play the 'coon' seems to testify to a subjectivity that deviates from Judith Butler's Foucauldian perspective of blindly following predefined scripts, this choice is everything but blind. On the contrary, Williams's role is an enforced response to the powerful discourses which determine who one is rather than one determining it for oneself. The fact that the two young men entitle their performance 'The Two Real Coons', (Phillips 2005 11)² which ironically suggests a superior degree of authenticity to minstrel shows performed by white players, is only further proof of Butler's historicised and culturally demarcated definition of parody, because the intended irony is most likely lost on their racist audience. Bert follows and performs a script on stage that is put on public display for white laughter and debases not only himself but a whole group. While being hopelessly out of date, his performance resonates with the terrible legacy of slavery and the ongoing struggle for racial recognition and equality. However, his (predominantly) white audience never fails to recognise '[t]his buffoon. This nigger' (84).

In the first of several scenes in the novel in which Bert looks at himself in the mirror, the following thoughts rush through his mind:

The first time he looked in the mirror he was ashamed... No longer Egbert Austin Williams. He kept telling himself, I am no longer Egbert Austin Williams. As I apply the burnt cork ... I am leaving behind Egbert Austin Williams. However, I can, at any time, reclaim this man ... he knew that he had disappeared ... every night he would have to rediscover himself before he left the theatre ... just who was this new man and what was his name?... Sambo? Coon? Nigger? However, the audience never failed to

recognize this creature. That's him! That's the nigger! He looks like that... I know him! I know him! But this was not Egbert Austin Williams... This was not any negro known to any man. This was not a Negro... This was somebody else's fantasy'. (57–58)

The revelatory effect of the fabricated groundless fantasy is only visible and painfully palpable to the black people in the audience. If the novel's protagonists keep insisting that this person, this 'darky entertainer' never existed, Bert's tragedy is that the white public sees him as identical to his role. In fact, his white audience is only too happy to continue to embrace this de-formity, this act of stylised repetition that approximates the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, however illusory. In a racist environment, the performer's assumed identity is therefore seen as his 'true' identity. White America demands these eternal repetitions of its fantasy for its confirmation of the stereotype and for its security. In the performer's words they 'must understand how to make them feel safe... They feel safe watching a supposedly powerless man playing an even more powerless thing. Williams and Walker have to respect this' (121).

In 'Significant Corporeality: Bodies and Identities in Jackie Kay's Fiction', Patrick Williams argues that Joss Moody, the transsexual black female trumpeter in Jackie Kay's novel, *Trumpet*, 'performs gender in order to perform music' (45); similarly it may be said that Bert Williams performs race in order to perform theatre. To him, his art is everything.³ If, however Joss 'performs his identity in order to enter a different performative space, where that identity no longer has substance or importance, where the corporeal is in fact no longer significant' (45), the opposite is sadly and tragically true for Bert. His performance constitutes and affirms a corporeality that comes to be seen by his racist audience as his 'true' identity. If, for Joss Moody, the musical performance functions as 'locus of truth' and '[i]n its dissolution of individual ego and identity, the music grants access to a wider identity — transhistorical, transcultural, potentially universal' (45) it is again the opposite effect that is created in the case of Williams's performance: it fixes the individual ego — and by extension the entire group he represents — within a limiting identity of a historically and culturally predefined script. Deplorably, this 'I' cannot free itself from the aggregation of interpellations and their historicity. Contrary to being empowering or liberating, Bert's performance is experienced in the resonant term of 'performative bondage' (6).

In her reading of Simone de Beauvoir, Butler suggests that gendered bodies (read racialised bodies) are 'so many "styles of flesh"', and goes on to say that '[t]hese styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities' (1999 177). She adds that gender (race) has cultural survival as its end and that those who will not agree to believe in these culturally constructed fictions will receive punishment: 'The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress' (1999 178). Bert is only too acutely aware of the possibility of

these punitive consequences when he says: 'Mr. Bert Williams and Mr. George Walker are entertainers, and they have to respect the conventions of the time or face the consequences... Too much fighting talk is not going to help anybody' (120) because 'he knows not to strain the color line for he respects their violence ... he will proceed with caution and neither irritate nor provoke,' always vigilant not to break the 'unwritten contract that exists between the Negro performer and his white audience' (10).

Throughout *Dancing in the Dark* Phillips makes it abundantly clear that the pressures to conform to pre-existing expectations and scripts experienced by Williams are not limited to the physical confines of the theatre but extend beyond its boundaries into the performer's larger social reality. This predicament is described in especially poignant terms when, during a race riot raging in the streets outside, the performer conceives of the events in exclusively histrionic terms: 'But tonight his fellow white citizens are angry ... Bert hides in his dressing room ... ready to leave whenever America is ready to receive him ... he will wait until ... his audience is ready for him' (68). In other words, Bert experiences his entire life as a performance. While evoking the topos of the theatrum mundi this passage is a clear illustration of Judith Butler's conceptualisation of performativity as a human condition. In this case of racialised expectations, the black person is never free to 'be' himself but finds himself in the permanent condition of playing a role. This leads an exasperated Williams to ask the question: 'Can the colored American ever be free to entertain beyond the evidence of his dark skin? Can the colored man be himself in twentieth-century America?' (100). Sadly, however, towards the end of the novel, Bert's final conclusion is that '[w]e are being held hostage as performers' (208), condemned to please and serve the white man. Bert Williams can be described as a black man held in custody or, as it were, captured on the stage.⁴

Phillips portrays Williams as entangled in the terrible net of catering to a racially demeaning and debasing stereotype while at the same time he is desperately trying to make a living and assert himself as an artist. In Tabish Khair's words the performer is caught 'in the double bind of using the actor's art to confirm prejudices, which then blind their audiences to that art' (online). However, at the time in which the novel is set, minstrelsy was the only way for a black performer to have access to mainstream entertainment. Opportunities and roles were limited for black artists. If, as the highest paid black entertainer of his times, Bert Williams can be viewed as the embodiment of the American Dream, the rules that allowed him access to this dream were dictated by whites. The money he made was white money. Unsurprisingly, his performance of racial 'crossover' — a term which describes the popularity of black performers with a white audience — enraged and frustrated his contemporaries. Aida Walker, his partner's wife, alternately calls him a 'smoked white man' (186) and '[t]his damn fool know-it-all West Indian with his white heart ... this white man's fool' (188).

It is important to keep in mind that minstrelsy is not a form of entertainment that originated in black culture; on the contrary it derives from white American folklore. As Ralph Ellison has famously pointed out in his essay 'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke', 'this "darky" entertainer is white' (1571), his role has grown out of the 'white American's Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness' (1571) and in this white branch of American folklore 'the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable' (1572). When the popular music performer Prince was popular, the black saxophonist and activist Morris Wilson accused him of being 'the top white act out there right now!' (qtd in Garber 274), an allegation that applies with equal force to Bert Williams's situation.

As such, Bert's career can be read as a model of Booker T. Washington's philosophy as advocated in his famous Atlanta Exposition Address which assures whites of the black community's devotion and humility.⁵ The impossibility of separating art and these social pressures has been discussed by several critics and addressed by Caryl Phillips himself in terms of the black artist's responsibility to his community as he is always seen as synecdoche, as representing the ethnic whole.⁶

The novel convincingly depicts how, with the changing times and an increase of African-American self-assertion and race pride, the pressure becomes quite intolerable for Bert Williams and he suffers from a deep sense of shame, embarrassment and guilt. Therefore, his only defence is to discuss his performance in terms of his art, the smoke-screen hiding him. In his effort to assert himself as an artist, Phillips has Williams insist that all he is doing is performing a role, playing a part all the while treading very carefully lest he should upset his white public:

The audience may think they are watching a powerless man but they are, in fact, watching art. We must understand how to make them feel safe, George. We must see the line. We cross that line, George, then who is going to pay to see us? ... Right now nobody will pay to see the colored man be himself, so we must tread carefully. (121)

In one crucial scene Bert receives a visit from prominent members of the black community who, in an appeal to his sense of responsibility to the community, urge him to re-write his script and change his performance because his portrayal of a Negro character is 'wounding the race' (180). However, he withdraws into his protective shell and abdicates any responsibility for his representation of a black man: 'Am I responsible for how the Negro is viewed in America? I am an entertainer, what would you have me do?' (179) 'He was merely playing a character. His darky was clearly not representative of them or their worlds. His coon was a very particular American coon as seen by a man from the outside' (180).

Phillips's novel reveals how this continuous effort of trying to escape the reality that black art is always seen in relation to the entire black people and not only as an individual act of artistic expression, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually wreaks havoc on Bert Williams's dignity, professional pride

and identity. Williams turns to alcohol and withdraws into himself physically and psychologically. This retreat is captured by Phillips in the fact that Bert finds most comfort in various 'place(s) of refuge' (93) as there are available to him — most prominently, his dressing room, but also the cabin on board the ship that takes him to the UK and Metheney's bar. These restricted/restricting spaces constitute very apt spatial symbols of Bert's physical, social, cultural and mental incarceration.

In this context it is interesting to note that *Dancing in the Dark* is also a novel that takes its place in the tradition of texts focusing on the troubled relationship between African-American fathers and sons.⁷ In Phillips's novel Bert's father functions as the performer's conscience or, to speak in psychoanalytical terms, as his super-ego. As such, the father figure not only represents the biological father but the symbolic order which in turn stands for society at large, that is in this case, the black community. Williams significantly regards his adoption of the blackface minstrel mask as a betrayal of his father ('It was in Detroit that he first betrayed his father', [58]). Moreover, his father, his conscience, accuses him of being 'deaf to everything but the roar of the white audience' (144), of having 'mortgaged his soul' (159), accusations that echo Phillips's comments below about Williams and contemporary hip-hop performers. In Lacan's terms, Bert has failed before the paternal law so that his father — and by extension his community — subsequently disown him: 'But this is not his son... This grotesque simpleton... This buffoon. This nigger' (83–84). In his search for white approval, his Faustian pact with the devil, Bert Williams is yet another of the many Othello figures that have populated Phillips's fiction from the very beginning of his writing career as seen most prominently in the re-writing of Othello's story in *The Nature of Blood*.⁸

Even though Butler herself is reluctant to address race as a category in her conceptualisation of performativity, various critics have argued that the performativity of race is nowhere more evident than in minstrelsy. As, for example, J. Martin Favor observes: 'Minstrelsy suggests at its root that "race" is performable, if not always already performed. That is, with the proper make-up, a white person could be "black", and by removing pigmentation, a black person could become "white". "Race" is theatrical — it is an outward spectacle — rather than being anything internal or essential' (123).

In this context Sara Ahmed's discussion surrounding the notion of what she calls 'the perpetual confirmation of the knowability of strangers' (130) sheds further light on the issue of the performativity of race. Basing her analysis on John Griffin's autobiography *Black Like Me* (1970), in which a white man changes his pigmentation from white to black through medical interference in order to find out the 'truth' of being black, Ahmed explores the way in which 'skin ... is seen to hold the "truth" of the subject's identity' and how this essentialising vision of the black skin is 'over-determined by the "knowledges" available of blackness' which are 'already structured by the knowledges that keep a stranger in a certain place' (131). Keeping in mind that in its conception minstrelsy is a white

form of entertainment, it is a manifestation of what Ahmed calls ‘an apparatus of knowledge that masters the stranger by taking its place’ (131). In other words, by assuming the blackface mask, the white minstrel performer regulates and hence confirms his, and even more importantly his audience’s, ‘knowledge’ about the black subject he represents. As a black man performing in blackface, Bert finds himself in the distressing position of seeing himself both ‘as a stranger and as imprisoned by the stranger’ (Ahmed 131 [italics in original]) and like Griffin, Bert finds himself ‘inhabiting the figure and the body of the stranger’ (131). For Ahmed ‘being estranged from one-self by passing for a stranger is hence narratable only as a story of “being imprisoned” by flesh. Passing for the stranger turns the stranger’s flesh into a prison’ (132). In white minstrelsy, the fantasy works because the difference between the performer and the subject performed is understood as both the player and the audience ‘know’ that the performer has taken the role of the other. In adopting the place of the stranger, the difference between performer and character is perpetually confirmed. In Bert’s case, precisely the opposite effect is achieved: it is not the difference but the disavowal of difference that is constantly reaffirmed. The difference is only painfully known to him and his black audience, but for his white audience his performance is not an affirmation of the difference, but of the identity with his theatrical role that is perpetually reaffirmed.

In the novel Williams insists that he is merely an artist performing a role, that ‘his character, this Shylock Homestead ... bears no relationship to the real Egbert Austin Williams’s (12). Yet, applying Sara Ahmed’s words to this context, ‘the fantasy of an ability (or a technique) to *become without becoming*’ (132 [italics in original]) is sadly completely unavailable to Bert. Even though he has developed his technique to perfection it does not become visible as a technique. On the contrary, it is precisely because the minstrels are such skilled performers that, as Robert Nowatzki so aptly puts it, ‘their performances become unintentional acts of passing’ (125–26), passing for ‘coon’ characters, the only identity their audience allows them. Bert is not judged on the basis of his technique — apart from some of his fellow performers, like Ziegfeld who appreciates him as an artist (175–76) — but he is evaluated on the basis of the reproduction of the stereotypical demeaning image of the black man. Here the knowledge of strangers receives a double affirmation. The clear-cut difference between the performer and his role — as in the case of a white man impersonating a black man — is blurred in the case of the black man in blackface. The black man assuming the black minstrel mask becomes identical with the theatrical role he has adopted. It is precisely because he and his Negro audience know the difference that this performance is regarded as a form of theatrical self-humiliation. George Walker, the W.E.B. du Bois counterpart to Bert’s Booker T. Washington⁹, describes this sentiment as follows: ‘The one fatal result of this [white minstrelsy] to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up

as “darkies”. Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself” (119–20). On the other hand, for the white performer the assumption of the black minstrel mask is a set of practices through which knowledge of strangers functions to affirm a white, masculine identity. Again following Ahmed: ‘Through adopting or taking on signifiers of the subordinated other, passing becomes a mechanism for reconstituting or reproducing the other as the “not-I” *within* rather than *beyond* the structure of the “I”’ (132 [italics in original]). If Griffin, the white man, can say when looking at himself in the mirror ‘[h]e in no way resembled me’ (qtd in Ahmed 132), then Bert, as portrayed by Phillips, feels exactly the same way — ‘this was not a man that he recognized’ (58). That is, Ahmed’s conclusion about Griffin that ‘the split between the “he” and the “I” is seeable within the mirror image of the face’ (132) is equally applicable to Bert’s situation. This relation between identity and looking is most clearly captured when the protagonist looks at himself in the mirror. The mirror is clearly one of the dominant images employed in *Dancing in the Dark*. In many passages throughout the novel there are descriptions of Williams staring at himself into his dressing room mirror, which for him ‘is the most important part of the room’ (89).

The pivotal scene (already partly quoted earlier) in which Williams scrupulously examines himself in the mirror when he blackens his face for the first time is saturated with affirmations that ‘this was not Egbert Austin Williams’s’ (58), that is, with Bert’s attempts at disassociating himself from the person that he sees himself becoming as he gradually applies the offensive make-up. It is also interesting to note how in an almost chant-like manner, Bert keeps repeating his full name in an effort to preserve his dignity and identity. As a result of the final transformation ‘He erased himself. Wiped himself clean off the face of the earth so that he found himself staring back at a stranger’ (58). However, if for the white subject passing for black is the possibility to ‘*become without becoming*’ (Ahmed 132 [italics in original]), Phillips portrays Bert, who is desperately trying to claim the same difference for himself, as knowing that his audience has already fixed him in their racist ‘hate stare’ to *be* the stranger that he has become, anticipating their cries of recognition ‘I know him! I know him!’ (58). Unlike Bert, the white minstrel performer and his body can put difference on and off as he likes using it like an extra layer of skin that can be easily wiped off. But Phillips reveals Bert as only too well aware that with his performance, he throws precisely this difference into doubt and seems to confirm and condone the domestication of the other. The theme of painstaking self-examination reaches its climax when at the end of his (fictionalised) life Bert spends the whole day staring into a hand-held mirror — significantly provided for him by his wife who refers to these sessions as her ‘husband’s daily performances’ (207) — in a final attempt to make sense of his identity and life.

Apart from the mirror the second most prominent emblem used in the novel is that of the mask. As an ambivalent symbol the mask is simultaneously a form

of deception or illusion, sometimes it can be both. On one hand In terms of race relations, the mask hides the true emotions (of slaves, blacks) and allows its wearer to have an identity without the 'other's' (white master's) detection. On the other hand, it gives the illusion that the slave/black person is exactly how the white person believes him to be: ignorant, primitive, lazy, and stupid. While it conceals an identity that may be understood as true and authentic, Bert Williams's masquerade is in fact the means by which the conceptions about black people and their 'authenticity' is produced. It operates as an insidious reinforcement of the sanctioned norms of the dominant order. The mask exacts the spectator's recognition and acceptance of the same racial identity (targeted for subversion) intended for entertainment purposes only. Bert's performance perpetuates and confirms racial prejudice and stereotypes while it simultaneously increases entertainment value and reassures the white audience of (illusory) racial differences and boundaries. The 'enabling violation' — discussed earlier in this essay — of masking as a means of challenging and transgressing borders or of calling a 'regulatory fiction' (Butler 1999 175) into question is not at Bert's disposal. The image he projects is dismaying, not powerful and effective.

In this use of the image of the mask, the novel resonates with echoes of some of the key texts from African-American literature, first and foremost Laurence Dunbar's poem 'We Wear the Mask', but also passages from Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the protagonists express the need for performance, simulation, artificiality and masquerade.¹⁰

In the novel, one of the most tragic consequences of Williams's self-humiliating performance is that together with his personal dignity — as a male player — Bert is stripped of his masculinity and male pride. His representation of the stupid, ignorant fool caters to one of the extreme stereotypes associated with black male sexuality. According to Myra Jehlen: 'One stereotype of the black man threatens violence and uncontrollable sex. The other has him contemptibly effeminate. Black men are seen simultaneously as excessively male and insufficiently masculine' (46–47). Following Marjorie Garber 'in some contexts black men "became" "women" in and for white Western culture (physically, through the violence of lynching and castration; socially, through their relegation to domestic service, subservience, and comic inconsequence)' (281). While Bert's performance predominantly reproduces the stereotype of comic inconsequence, it also reproduces the relegations of service and subservience. All of these assignments, taken together, result in his emasculation and metaphorical castration. To put it bluntly: the 'dumb fool' is simply not attractive sexually. As Louise Yelin has pertinently put it, in *Dancing in the Dark* 'Phillips underscores the engendering of psychosexual pathologies by the traumas of racism' (97). This trauma is most clearly reflected in Bert's oppressed sexuality. Phillips's representation of Williams as a disempowered, feminised or even sexually neutered character results in a sexless marriage completely devoid of physical contact. The fact that

in addition he calls his wife Mother (in Phillips's spelling with a capital M) shows the depth of the character's trauma.¹¹

In her discussion of Nella Larsen's work, Judith Butler quotes Hazel Carby who says that 'the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of exploitation of black sexuality led to the repression of passion and the repression or denial of [female] sexuality and desire' (Butler 1993 175).¹² This observation clearly applies to Bert's situation as represented in Phillips's novel in that he represses any kind of sensuality, on stage, through his re-enactment of the trauma of the de-sexualized black individual in the figure of the darky entertainer. Following Norma Alarcon, who has insisted that women of colour — and I would like to include men of colour — are 'multiply interpellated', Butler concludes that 'this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of the socially instituted norms, is composed of *racializing norms*, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another' (1993 182 [italics in original]). Historically, minstrelsy's buffoon was specially constructed to be as sexually undesirable as possible.¹³ In adopting an aesthetic defined by race and playing the clumsy, clownish buffoon, Bert obviously gratifies the emasculated image imposed by a frightened white audience in need of domesticating and thus containing threatening black male sexuality.

Reading Phillips's essay on Marvin Gaye in *A New World Order* alongside *Dancing in the Dark* further illuminates the issue of the ambivalent representation of black male sexuality in American culture. For Phillips, 'White American society placed so much emphasis upon black male sexuality that it created for itself an imaginary nightmare' (2001 45). Whereas early images of African-Americans tended to emasculate and neuter the black male, nowadays the fear is engendered by the image of the 'superspade' (2001 46). If Marvin Gaye had no idea how to escape the burdensome role of 'Sex God' imposed on him, Bert Williams would appear to have had no idea how to escape the image of the de-sexualized shuffling 'coon'. Both men could be said to have 'finally submitted to the power of the stereotype' (2001 55) and as a result feared sexual intimacy.¹⁴ In analogy to what Phillips says at the end of his article on Marvin Gaye, Bert is also portrayed as understanding 'that he must play the part that has been assigned to him, the part that he thought he could pick up and put down at will. A Mephistophelean pact' (2001 59).

On several occasions during his writing career — and especially following the publication of *Dancing in the Dark* — Phillips has deplored the fact that up to this day the black male artist is still today determined by the racist assumptions about black male sexuality. While at times showing sympathy for the predicament in which the black male performer is caught up, as in his essay on Marvin Gaye, Phillips has become increasingly impatient with black performers who show themselves in compliance with images ordained by the essentialising politics of race. In the introduction to his essay collection, *A New World Order* (significantly subtitled 'The Burden of Race'), Phillips offers a scathing critique of 'racial

posturing' (2001 13) as presented and articulated by black gansta rappers. To Phillips 'gansta rappers bear no more relationship to African-American life than the Mafia does to Italian-American life' (2001 14) and strongly condemns the fact that these 'stand-off' performances are 'encouraged and rewarded by capitalists, both black and white' (2001 14).

Phillips clearly wants to make *Dancing in the Dark* resonate for the present when he states that 'one of the reasons why I wrote this novel now is because of hip hop' (Phillips 2007 105). The author is highly critical of the — in his words — "minstrelsy" of some hip-hop artists' (Foot 1). To his mind, today's hip-hop artists, like Williams, degrade themselves in their race for riches. 'For many making it in the rap world is something to aspire to — but I think of it as performative bondage, being tied down to a part that degrades and debases while it appears to esteem and enrich. I'm fed up with it. If you listen to rap most of it is about making money. It's the same with the Williams's story — make money at all costs' (Foot 1).

Yet, the only time in the novel that Bert Williams chose not to use the offensive make-up (when he was asked to participate in a film) the audience's reaction was one of violent rejection and the screening resulted in a 'riot' (191). Phillips shows Williams's efforts to rationalise the violent response as indicative of a subservience that marked both his career and life: 'They are angry because he has chosen not to cork his face ... Between his needs and his audience's expectations he walks a tightrope ... but they too must understand that there is, on his part, no desire to cause offense' (191). One could argue, as Phillips appears to do, that he is not only enslaved but, what's more, he enslaves himself through the adoption of the blackface minstrel mask. He is portrayed by Phillips as seeming to accept white supremacy and the inferior status assigned him as a black person in America and behaves like an Uncle Tom — humble, dignified, patient in the face of the unregenerate racism of a white produced stereotype. Yet, a supposedly authentic review from the time included in the novel says tellingly: 'Gone was the familiar "darky humour" heavily laden with pathos, and in its place he gave to us an uncorked colored person of cunning and resourcefulness that left a sour taste in the mouth of all who had paid money to attend this presentation' (192). This quotation provides a concise summary of the burdensome requirements and limitations faced by the black entertainer (which basically says that 'we pay you so you must dance our dance'). In other words, Williams, as portrayed by Phillips, finds himself trapped in a web of expectations and vicious stereotypes derived from the legacy of slavery and financially motivated capitalist dictates.

By way of conclusion, *Dancing in the Dark* engages with the representation of minstrelsy in order to point to the pressing issue of race and the ways in which racial categories have been and continue to be socially constituted. On the one hand, the novel addresses the postmodern concern of constructed identities and invites a reading which extends these conceptualisations to include race as a

category. On the other hand, despite being a historical novel set at the beginning of the twentieth century, with its foregrounding of the burdensome expectations of black entertainers, the text encourages its readers to acknowledge the topicality of the perpetuation of demeaning racial stereotypes as they still affect black artists well into the twenty-first century. With this novel, Phillips has again offered a text that demonstrates his ongoing concern, but also his growing impatience, with the 'burden of race' (2001 9).

NOTES

- ¹ See Judith Butler, 'The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed... *In imitating gender* [race], *drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender* [race] *itself*' (1999 175 [italics in original]).
- ² All further page references to the novel are given in the text.
- ³ Every evening Bert is involved in the struggle to 'impress them [his audience] with the overwhelming evidence of his artistry' (12).
- ⁴ Bert's off-stage persona couldn't contrast more starkly with his on-stage character. In a sentence that is repeated twice, Phillips describes him as possessing 'old-fashioned dignity ... civic pride' and a 'stout heart' (3, 4). His 'dignified presence' (94) challenges white people's perception of him and — in an echo of Booker T. Washington's famous phrase '[c]ast down your bucket where you are' — 'they would rather he knew his place' (94).
- ⁵ See Booker T. Washington: 'you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen' (596).
- ⁶ At what point do you tell an individual, 'you are letting the side down'? 'You should not do that because your responsibility is not to your art, your responsibility is to your imagined community'? (Phillips 2007 105).
- ⁷ See for example James Baldwin's description of his problematic relationship with his father in *Notes of a Native Son*; or Alice Walker's depiction of the relationship between Harpo and Mr in *The Color Purple*; or Toni Morrison's rendering of the troubled relationship between Milkman and his father Macon Dead II in her novel *Song of Solomon*.
- ⁸ For more detail see: Petra Tournay, 'Challenging Shakespeare: Strategies of Writing Back in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*'; and Fernando Galván, 'Between Othello and Equiano: Caryl Phillips's Subversive Rewritings'. See also Zadie Smith's similar wording in her description of the immigrant's 'devil's pact' (*White Teeth* 336) upon entering Britain.
- ⁹ Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) was a black rights activist who advocated a conciliatory approach to race relations whereas W.E.B. du Bois (1868–1963) was an uncompromising, radical civil rights champion.
- ¹⁰ See for example Richard Wright: 'I smiled each day ... to keep my position seemingly sunny [...] I laughed in the way he expected me to laugh' (1475). In combination with the notion of servitude — right at the beginning of the novel Bert characterises his work as 'sweating servitude' (6) — the emblem of the mask also strongly evokes Langston Hughes's poem 'Negro Servant' in which the speaker after a long working day: '[a]ll day subdued, polite,/ Kind, thoughtful to the faces that are white' returns to 'Dark Harlem' in the evening where he experiences 'sweet relief from the faces that are white' (1301).

- ¹¹ In psychoanalytical terms, Bert is still caught up in the mirror stage and has not been able to transfer his feelings of narcissism onto a socially acceptable other.
- ¹² In this context see Aida Walker's bitter comment which clearly describes precisely this predicament of the African-American performer: '[p]rejudice means that, of course, we can never fall in love or have a romance at the center of our Williams and Walker productions. It is all too easy for a colored show to offend a white audience so instead we pretend that we have no such emotions, and we are all guilty of this pretense, all of us. We accept that the remotest suspicion of a love story will condemn us to ridicule' (117).
- ¹³ Significantly, Bert's partner George Walker represents the other extreme on stage as well as in life. He flaunts black male sexuality and engages in the punishable transgression of having an affair with a white woman.
- ¹⁴ In addition to being a racial and cultural 'other', Phillips constructs Williams as a sexual outsider who is involved in a sexless marriage and calls his wife 'mother'.

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